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# Women's Issues at GVSU: A Personal View

*Mary Seeger*

As one who works in the fields of women's history, local history, and oral history, and who regularly urges women to record and document their own lives, I'm following my own advice in providing this overview of women's involvement at Grand Valley. And it's only a personal overview: the names and dates and details as well as many other aspects of GV history I have recorded in great detail and sealed up for some future historian.

My husband Bill and I were on the GV "campus" when the college was but an architect's model on a card table in the old farmhouse on M-45 (then M-50). We were enthusiastic about being part of a new venture and were hired to begin in 1964, the second year of instruction, but decided to spend one additional year in Madison, where we had both earned our doctorates at the University of Wisconsin. We began our careers at Grand Valley in the fall of 1965.

Because my husband had grown up in West Michigan, I had a source of advice and counsel when faced with the astonishing questions about my religious beliefs, and I learned the local definition of the word *Christian*. Yet I was completely unprepared for some other questions from administrators and other faculty members: was I pregnant? was my dissertation complete? The worst question was, why was I working? The implication was clear: one didn't NEED to work if one's spouse, read *husband*, was employed. Fortunately, there were a couple of other husband-wife teams on the faculty, and one of my first committee tasks was to tone down the anti-nepotism policy.

Faculty governance as we know now it was nonexistent in the early days. A council for each administrative division met regularly, but, strangely, there were no faculty members on the Academic Affairs Policy Council. That changed when I became the only faculty representative. Later I served as the second chair of the College of Arts and Science senate, and as the first chair of the All-College senate. On several occasions during my years in these positions as chair, I was taken aside by male faculty, presumably well-intentioned, for advice about how to conduct meetings: e.g., stronger direction was needed; not everybody had to be given the opportunity to talk; consensus was unnecessary. Those experiences marked the first time I was conscious of gender differences at meetings, if not in communication in general.

Although women and women's issues were always included in some courses, it was not until the 1970s that specialized courses were introduced. The 1975-76 catalogue included An Introduction to Women's Studies, The Psychology of Women, Women in Literature, and The Biology and Behavior(!) of Women—all listed in connection with a minor in women's studies. The College of Arts and Sciences,

Thomas Jefferson College, and William James College all participated in a cross-college program in the 1970s.

In 1988, the women's studies program was revitalized when Doris Rucks joined GVSU as its director. A series featuring women faculty and their research and an annual women's festival attract more participants each year, and one women's studies course is included in the "values" section of our general education program. The increasing numbers of new faculty with special interest and background in gender studies ensure that both departmental curricula and the women's studies courses will benefit from new perspectives. Both are needed.

Three one-credit physical education courses were required of all students from the beginning into the 1970s. Women's softball was introduced in 1968, volleyball in 1969, basketball in 1970, and tennis shortly thereafter. Grand Valley was the first collegiate institution in Michigan to offer athletic scholarships for women; the first was awarded in 1974. With the passage of Title IX in 1972, women's athletics gained momentum, decreased somewhat in the 1980s, and are on the upswing in the 1990s. If the expenses for football were disregarded, women's athletics at GVSU would exceed men's in numbers of participants, monies invested in the programs, and scholarship dollars available. When we interview candidates for our top academic scholarships, the Presidential and Faculty awards, almost every young woman has competed in high school athletics, enjoying opportunities that did not exist when Grand Valley opened its doors.

Although no formal organization for women has existed at GVSU, we are known in the state and nationally as accomplishing a great deal by informal means. The Women's Scholarship Fund, the Women's Climate Study, and the Anti-Harassment Policy are examples of projects that resulted because of agitation by GV women, both faculty and staff. We've been fortunate in having strong women on the Board of Control, most notably past chair Maxine Swanson and the current chair Judith Hooker. Both supported our request for administrative internships for women and for GV funding to send participants to the Bryn Mawr Summer Institute for Women In Higher Education Administration.

October, 1996 marks the initiation of the GVSU Women's Commission. All employee groups at Grand Valley are represented, along with students. I anticipate that the commission will continue to pursue the concerns expressed in the Women's Climate Study results. My particular issues are two. First is the great disparity between female and male senses of how equitable and fair Grand Valley is. Female faculty and staff also reported that they are less respected than their male colleagues. Second is the information from the annual survey of entering students conducted each fall at Grand Valley. On the measures of competitiveness, emotional and physical health, physical appearance and popularity, the female students rate themselves far lower than male students do. This is particularly troublesome to me, since the Grand Valley student population is 60.8 percent female, and because Grand Valley women typically outnumber males on the dean's list, in graduation honors, as outstanding seniors in their majors, and in Phi Kappa Phi, the national honor society.

The change I consider the most significant is the increase in the number of female faculty and staff. To have female colleagues in every department, on every committee, and on the Deans' Council is extremely important to me. In 1965-66, 2 of 34 faculty listed in the catalogue were women (5 %); in 1975-76, 75 of 286 (26.2%). In fall, 1986, the faculty numbered 217: 164 (75.5%) male, and 53 (24.5%) female faculty. Eighty-nine per cent of the men were associate or full professors, but only sixty-four per cent of the women. In fall 1995, the faculty numbered 362: 216 (59.7%) male, 146 (40.3%) female. Sixty-seven and a half per cent of the men are associate or full professor; roughly forty-two percent of the women are at those ranks. Not much change can be seen in this fall's statistics: although the total number of tenure-eligible faculty has increased by 18, of the 380 total faculty, 224 (59%) are male, and 156 (41%) are female. Of the male faculty, 68% are associate or full professors; of the female faculty, 47% are. However, I will continue to watch optimistically as the recently hired female faculty move through the promotion and tenure processes.

At 25, I would never have imagined spending my entire professional life at one institution. Of course, the rapid changes and the opportunities I've enjoyed at GVSU mean that it really hasn't been the "same" institution or the same position. I continue to thrive on my deanly work and on my teaching, and to take pride in such things as the Seeger Endowment, begun by anonymous GV grads. Changes? Yes. Progress for women? Yes. Is all sanguine in Happy Valley? Well . . . I leave you with some recent anecdotes:

One GVSU unit continues to send mail to me as Mr. Dean M. Seeger.

I have recently explained (over and over and over) to a very young, junior, male faculty member the importance of parallel terminology. (He insisted on being called First Name, Middle Name, Last Name, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of [discipline deleted], but thought it okay to send students to see "Mary over in ARC.")

Male student to my assistant: "But I know Dean Seeger will approve this." ("This" was something completely outrageous.) "He told me so when I met with him last week."

Male Student: "I'm looking for Dean Seeger."

Dean Seeger: "You've found her."

Male Student: "Dean? That's a very strange name for a woman."